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RUNAWAYS

Shooting for a Runaway Success

Brian K. Vaughan and Adrian Alphona offer CSBG readers a first look at the five Runaways (their names are under their sketches). "The two young unnamed women in the lower left-hand corner—the girl in the hat and the tall Asian girl—are two members of Excelsior in their *civilian* attire," Vaughan said. So can you figure who they are when they're in costume?...

The first Runaways series was a critically acclaimed human interest superhero ensemble drama that was virtually lost in a sea of Marvel series debuts. But writer Brian K. Vaughan and the powers that be at Marvel saw too much promise in the book to let it fade away—so Runaways is coming back in early 2005 with a new series from the same creative team.

What led to the decision to relaunch a book that was cancelled less than year earlier? "Well, despite being a critical success, our first eighteen issues never quite lit up the sales chart," Vaughan said, "though ***Runaways*** always sold about as well as my 'hit' series ***Y: The Last Man***, so I guess everything is relative.

"Just as I was about to write what was *supposed* to be our last issue of ***Runaways***, our first trade finally came out and blew everyone away by doing phenomenally well. Marvel immediately called and asked if I'd be interested in keeping the series going. And that's really a testament to our readers. ***Runaways*** has an *incredibly* loyal fanbase of young people—especially young women—many of whom discovered these collections in bookstores. They send us drawings, they start great fan pages like 'The Hostel,' they flood message boards with annoying posts berating other readers for not picking up the book, etc.

"But much as I appreciate our readers and *adore* these characters, I didn't want to keep writing the book if I didn't have anything more to say; after all, you can only have kids running away from their parents for so long!... After giving it a ton of thought, I came up with what I think is a really *amazing* new direction for the book. It will still be called ***Runaways***, and it will still be a parable about kids surviving the evils of the adult world, but our heroes will have an all-new mission and an all-different purpose."

Runaways was akin to *Kurt Busiek's* ***Thunderbolts*** in that it was built around a strong premise that immediately hooked readers. "At some point in their lives, all kids think that they have the most evil parents in the world, but Nico Minoru and her friends really *did*," Vaughan explained. "Discovering that they were the children of a group of super-villains known as The Pride, the teenagers stole weapons and resources from these criminals, before running away from home and eventually defeating their parents. But that was just the beginning...

"It's been a few months, and now that their evil parents are gone, nearly every bad guy in the Marvel Universe is trying to fill the power vacuum in Los Angeles, and the Runaways are the only heroes who can stop them."

Who are the Runaways? "We've got a new team leader—Nico Minoru, daughter of dark wizards. There's Gert Yorkes, daughter of time-traveling despots who willed her a telepathic dinosaur named Old Lace. Her boyfriend is lovably dimwitted Chase Stein, son of mad scientists. And finally, there's Karolina Chase, daughter of alien invaders, and young Molly Hayes, child of evil mutants." Just your average group of teens, right?

As Vaughan's synopsis indicates, the teen stars of the series are integrally linked to the mainstream Marvel Universe. Does he intend to play up those links to a greater degree in the new series than he did in the old? "Well, readers can expect to see a few familiar faces—though not predictable guest stars like Wolverine. Like our very popular arc that featured Cloak and Dagger last year, this new series will be firmly rooted in a totally unique corner of the Marvel Universe, while still being 100% accessible to readers new to comics."

"This year, we'll be introducing at least one brand-new character, a teenager who's the child of a *major* Marvel Universe villain. But which one?...

"Plus, there's Excelsior, an all-new team comprised of some fan-favorite Marvel characters. Are they heroes or villains—and what do they want with the Runaways?"

While the collected editions have been mixed with the Marvel Age digest-sized books, ***Runaways*** doesn't exactly stand as a Marvel Age series. So how *does* the series fit in to the Marvel line? "I'll let other people categorize us. All I know is that our series appeals to readers of all ages starving for magic decoder rings, secret hideouts, tortured romances, unbelievably shocking acts of evil, and all of the things that made me fall in love with comics when I started reading.

"I flatter myself to think that ***Runaways*** is the kind of classic, high-concept, new book that Lee and Kirby and Ditko would want to see Marvel publishing more of today. Those guys didn't get into comics to work on ***Batman*** and ***Superman***; they got into the medium to help build a House of Ideas. Hopefully, ***Runaways*** follows in that tradition."

There has been some preliminary discussion at Marvel regarding collecting the first ***Runaways*** series into a full-sized hardcover; does Vaughan think that this would help raise the series' profile with readers who might have overlooked the digest collections? "Well, it *would* definitely be cool to have a hardcover to put on my bookshelf—but to be honest, I *love* the digests, and they've been a tremendous hit in bookstores with children and adults. I'm twenty-eight years old, and I *love* reading those little ***Lone Wolf & Cub*** collections on the subway. I always knew ***Runaways*** was going to be collected in that format, so I wrote especially for that size. Sometimes, smaller *is* better!"

As the writer of ***Y—The Last Man*** and ***Ex Machina***, Vaughan is well known for complex character-driven stories with a lot of thought-provoking plot twists; are his readers going to find the same sort of thing in this series? "Absolutely! ***Runaways*** may not be a 'mature readers' book, but it's just as dark and challenging and irreverent as series like *Y* and *Ex Machina*. But like those books, I also like to think that it's fun and imaginative and unpredictable. I write all of my books for only one person... me. So if you're quirky enough to like one of the series that I write, I'm confident you'll find something to like in *all* of them."

Marvel is confident enough in the new ***Runaways*** that they're not testing the waters with a miniseries relaunch. "This is an ongoing book that's already been generously greenlit by Marvel for at least a guaranteed twelve issues—but we're all very confident that the series is going to last much longer than that. I already have the first two years plotted out, and artist *Adrian Alphona* and I are both convinced that this is going to be the biggest comeback for a team since ***Giant Size X-Men #1***," Vaughan said confidently.

Runaways #1, a $2.99 comic, is scheduled for February 16th release.

BY CLIFF BIGGERS

Courtesy your friendly neighborhood comics outlet!

Superman Soars in 2005

How do you follow up *Brian Azzarello, Jim Lee, & Scott Williams* on ***Superman***? And how do you make the Superman titles even more high profile than they were in 2004? It may seem hard to believe, but DC has found a way—and they'll add a fourth ***Superman*** series in the process!

The departure of *Brian Azzarello & Jim Lee* from ***Superman*** in the spring of 2005 means that a new creative team is needed for the core title—and DC has ventured to Hollywood to find a writer! *Mark Verheiden*, executive producer of ***Smallville*** (and writer of many of the series' best episodes), will be joined by artist *Ed Benes* when he takes over the series after the conclusion of the "For Tomorrow" storyline.

Superman #217, Verheiden's first issue, is also his first ongoing comics series in almost a decade—although it's not his first shot at the Man of Steel. "My history with DC Comics actually goes back quite a few years, including writing ***The Phantom, Human Target***, and even Superman for an issue of *Action Comics Weekly*, but I more or less dropped out of writing comics in the '90s to focus on my movie and TV career," Verheiden explained. "Flash forward to the 2000s. I'm co-executive producer on ***Smallville***, where I worked on almost every episode from season one through season three, writing or co-writing eleven myself. I was also involved in getting the ***Smallville*** comic going, and while doing that I met ***Superman*** editors *Eddie Berganza* and, on the phone, *Tom Palmer Jr.* Eddie asked if I wanted to take on ***Superman***, the comic. I had a meeting with *Dan Didio* where we clicked on various story points and ideas, and then I was off."

Verheiden knows exactly what angle he'll take on DC's flagship character. "I want to bring back the feeling of awe the character should generate when he does his 'super' thing on Earth. Sometimes Kal-el feels too much like mankind's pal and not the astounding, otherworldly, incredibly powerful being he truly is. However, that doesn't necessarily mean making him aloof or apart from humanity. It's pretty clear that Superman desperately wants to be part of human-kind, otherwise he wouldn't have married Lois or continued to stick around in the face of endless adversaries. So my series is going to explore his fascinating relationship with 'us,' a relationship that is going to be sorely tested by a variety of situations and villains."

While Verheiden is aware of the industry trend to produce methodically-paced storylines well suited for trade paperback compilation, that's not his approach. "I like comics that move and appreciate the importance of great, dynamic visuals, but at the same time I want to offer the reader enough meat to make the experience worth the cover price, regardless of whether we're talking about a monthly book or a down-the-line trade.

"I'd like the book to be reasonably accessible to readers coming in at any point, but to me that means trying to have at least one story that begins and ends in an issue, while other - usually more emotional stories, continue on. That said, I am *definitely* in the established Superman DC continuity. This isn't an Elseworlds book."

Verheiden also knows what supporting characters fans want to see, and he intends tso deliver. "Right now, Lois plays a major part in the story, and Jimmy Olsen," Verheiden said. "As far as the Daily Planet goes, we'll see. There's more planned, but Eddie will kill me if I spill those beans early."

Less dramatic changes are in store for ***Adventures of Superman***, where *Greg Rucka* will continue for his second year as writer. However, Rucka will be joined by a new artist: *Karl Kerschl*, best known for his work on the ***Majestic*** limited series. So how does it feel to be the senior Superman writer? When asked why he opted to stay on the title for a second year, Rucka answered the question with one of his own – "Because I wasn't telling a one-year story?

"My terms when they gave me the job was that I had stuff I wanted to do and stories that I wanted to tell, and now, ***DC Countdown*** [we told you about this project in ***CSN #916*** last week] is going to lead into a bunch of other stuff over the summer, and I'm one of the three writers on ***Countdown***, and Superman is one of the three icons of the DCU. So, here we get at least some consistency and continuity in terms of what we are trying to build, coming out of the ***Countdown*** book. That's a big part of it.

Rucka's mention of ***Countdown*** underscores a broader theme that will carry through all three core ***Superman*** books in 2005—that is, they will be tied more closely to the larger DCU. No, not a return to one, huge interconnected storyline with "triangle numbering" – each series will still tell its own story—but Superman's actions *will* take place in the broader context of the DCU. "You're going to start seeing events all through the DCU synch up a little more. There's going to be a concerted effort there, and Superman will be part and parcel to that. It was pretty difficult to do before this, because what Brian was writing pretty much, a story that absolutely posted barbed wire and sentries around his story, and said, 'Stay Away –that's not at all a critique on the story, it was just that we were all at different points in time. That put *Chuck [Austen]* and myself in a position of needing to do our own things. That's no longer going to be the case."

Kerschl is quite happy to be tackling DC's most iconic hero. "At first I kind of reeled in terror as self-doubt hit me and I wondered if I might be getting in over my head, but I've since sobered up and I'm really, really excited," he said. Kerschl has a definite vision of the Man of Steel that he intends to portray. "I think an important part of portraying Superman is conveying in him a sense of honesty and timelessness. He can't look too young, nor can he look too old. He can't be fashionable. His face should be stern and no-nonsense, but kind. He should be tall and muscular, but not too defined, and he should be sincere in every action. Basically, he should be *Christopher Reeve*. I keep tweaking my Superman design, but I'm getting much closer to something I'm happy with. He's deceptively difficult to draw, because he's more than a chiseled jaw and a spit-curl. You have to believe what's behind those eyes."

He's also working on his version of Superman's spectacles-clad alter ego. "The trend seems to be toward drawing Clark with the same build as Superman, and while that's a logical approach, I'm not sure it's fitting. I'll probably experiment with Clark's physique a bit and draw him a touch smaller than I'm drawing Supes—but not so drastically that it appears 'wrong.' He should look fit, but his chest shouldn't be bursting underneath his work shirt. One persona has to believably contrast the other, right? I think there's room for a bit of suspension of disbelief in regards to Clark's, um... shrinkage."

For the third Superman monthly, DC chose to go with someone old and someone new. Taking them in reverse order: the someone new is *Gail Simone*, who has been tapped as the new writer of ***Action Comics***. Joining her is someone old: none other than *John Byrne*, whose previous debut on Superman was one of the biggest Super-events of the last twenty-five years..

. How did Simone land the plum assignment? "I wasn't even aware that the book was available," Simone said. "Dan DiDio called and offered it to me—which just goes to show that there's no sense in the world and the universe is certainly doomed."

Once the offer was made and she heard who the artist was, she knew that she couldn't pass this up. "I could list reasons all day, but certainly working with John is one of the best reasons to say yes. I can't wait to see him back on this book! *John Byrne* drawing Superman again? Come on, that's the kind of stuff that makes reading comics *fun*!

"But on top of that, I really want to write stories for people that haven't ever regularly picked up Superman books. I'd love to see some ***X-Men*** readers, or ***Ultimate*** readers, or even ***Birds of Prey*** readers putting this book on their save lists. Dan and Super-editor *Eddie Berganza* made it very clear that they want me to go wild on this book, and I intend to do just that."

Byrne said that the ***Action*** offer came up out of the blue. "*Dan DiDio* is shuffling things around a bit, and called to ask if I would be interested in penciling ***Action Comics***," Byrne said. "At that point there wasn't even a writer attached to the project. Subject to a writer being assigned, I gave a tentative 'Yes.'

"Gail was assigned after me, so we had no opportunity to discuss this before she came aboard, but I'm glad to see her as part of the team. She has offered me input, but I think I will sit back and let her drive."

Byrne good-naturedly refers to himself as "strictly the art-robot" on ***Action*** this time around—and that's something he said suits him just fine. "I enjoy the occasional project where it's all about solving problems artistically," Byrne said. "It works a whole different set of 'muscles.'"

Byrne also explained that he's looking to come to ***Action*** with virtually a new set of eyes as far as Superman and the current state of the mythos go. "I haven't paid more than the most cursory attention to the Superman titles since I left," Byrne said. "In fact, recently, I spoke briefly with *Eddie Berganza,and* asked him to put together a 'guide book' so I can get caught up. Basically I told him to pretend I had never even heard of the character, and assemble reference accordingly."

Action will be the *third* monthly that Byrne will be illustrating for DC—and he's the writer of the other two (***Doom Patrol*** and ***Blood of the Demon***) as well. "For me that's not a heavy workload," Byrne said. "That's about normal. Without any effort I have usually done three pages of full pencils per day. With twenty-two working days in an average month, the sixty-six pages demanded by three monthly titles present no challenge. This is, after all, about the same as I was handling with various rotating titles like ***X-Men, Fantastic Four, Captain America, Marvel Team-Up, Avengers,*** etc. And, since I find I usually do more pages per day when working from someone else's script—on ***True Brit*** I averages five per day—this doesn't look like any problem at all."

Simone is thrilled with her new art partner. "The stars here are John and Kal-el. I'm happy to get to ride in the trunk."

Simone said that she and Byrne will work to ensure that the book delivers what the title promises: action. "I love action sequences and I'm completely unapologetic about that. With an artist like John, we can outperform any big-budget action film easily. We can have any location we want, and crazy ideas are only to be encouraged. You can't beat *Mark Verheiden* on ***Superman*** for the fantastic human relationships, and you can't beat *Greg Rucka* on ***Adventures*** for compelling real-life challenges—so our plan is to be the fun, wild…possibly insane Super-book."

Simone is already talking with Verhiden and Rucka to plan the direction of the Super-titles in 2005. "We're still solidifying things, but we definitely plan to have some of my all-time favorites visit Metropolis," Simone explained. "But that said, Superman doesn't need guests or stunts. He's *the man*. He doesn't need variants or tricks any more than a Porsche needs training wheels."

Simone is also eager to reinstill an awe-inspiring quality to the Man of Steel. "It bugs me to see even minor villains all being so patronizing to Superman. That's just asking for it. I don't care how arrogant you are—this is a guy you treat with respect, and you'd damn well better say his name in all caps while you're at it. People who call him the 'big boy scout,' should probably understand that very few boy scouts have heat vision, super-speed and an unbeaten track record for making despots and psychotic geniuses kiss his fist. I strongly suspect most of the villain community says his name in hushed tones, if they say it at all. Sure, Batman's scary. But *no one* wants Kal El mad at them...."

And now there's the matter of that fourth Superman title...

Later in 2005, DC will spotlight Superman in an all-star series called, appropriately enough, ***All Star: Superman***, produced by the all-star team of Grant Morrison & Frank Quitely. (This series, debuting later in 2005, will be the second in a line of ***All-Star*** titles, following All-Star: Batman, produced by *Jim Lee* and an as-yet-unnamed artist and starring Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson as Batman and Robin.)

The idea behind the ***All-Star*** line isn't to spin the characters into a new timeline, a new universe, or a new continuity. Instead, the creators are telling stories set in a contemporary period that both builds on the histories of the respective characters, while remaining fresh and as timeless as possible. These are books that designed to pull people in who maybe haven't

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read a Batman or Superman story in a while—iif ever. These are iconic stories that bring to the page what's pure about the character.

All-Star: Superman's origins go back a ways. "While I was still on *New X-Men*, [DC VP, Editorial] *Dan DiDio* called and asked me if I'd like to come back to DC to work on a Superman project with an artist of my choice. I told him I'd be delighted, but I was still on contract at the time and I wanted to wrap up my X-Men story before moving on. I'd planned to go back to DC anyway, to do the *Seven Soldiers* project and the Vertigo books, so it all worked out nicely....

"I write non-stop, so devoting a little of that to writing Superman comics is sheer delight, as far as I'm concerned. I've waited for this chance all my life and I feel I owe Superman as much thought and effort as anything else I'm doing. I'm taking this assignment *very* seriously. I want to give Superman the power, dignity and relevance he deserves and I see it as a way of paying back the DC universe for all the pleasure it's given me over the years, as a fan and a creator...

"I don't think we need to 'make' Superman relevant. We just have to tell stories which resonate with human experience. The best Superman stories are fables about love, pride, shame, fear, death, friendship etc. We can all relate to those big issues. Superman stories should represent huge, basic human dramas and human emotions, played out on a larger than life canvas."

Don't look for Morrison to attempt to make Superman a more "realistic" hero; as far as the writer is concerned, that's a formula predestined to fail. "Sales are always crap when comics get 'realistic' and sales are particularly crap right now, considering the wide-ranging public acceptance of superhero stories in other media. So Frank and I are keeping modern sensibilities in mind while trying to make sure that each of our stories addresses some basic human fear or need in a big, colorful, comic book way. We hope to produce a collection of science fiction folk tales with Superman at the heart of them. I like to think of these stories as 'relevant' to the human condition—although not necessarily relevant to the current headlines, if you see what I mean. ***All Star: Superman*** is intended to appeal to a wide audience of diverse people for a long time, like the Greek myths."

While the story isn't built on any continuity per se, Morrison isn't ignoring what's been done before. "Frank and I have our own way of integrating all the previous takes, but we don't dwell on the origin or the early years, so it doesn't really affect what we're doing. Our story catches up with Superman as he is *now*. Everybody knows the basics anyway, so we'd rather do something new...

"Dan wanted this to be 'Original' Superman, 'Classic' Superman basically - more like a movie or the animated version where the set-ups are the familiar ones most people know... With *All-Star: Superman*, I think I've come up with a whole new approach to the Lois, Clark and Superman relationship—I'll leave it at that until you see how it plays out in the books."

"We're using the leeway the *All-Star* concept gives us to take the best elements from every era of Superman and use them to build a whole new world and direction for the character. I'm certainly looking at this as my *definitive* statement. After Superman, I have no mainstream comics work lined up."

Why did Morrison choose Quitely as the artist for the book? "Superman's the best superhero, Frank's the best artist. It *had* to be him... My scripts call for a lot of near-animation of characters in the script because I know Frank can pull it off and make it move. This will be a new but weirdly-appropriate look for Superman and his world, I think. I also think this will be the first time the Clark Kent disguise has made sense visually. Frank draws the transition between Clark and Superman like it's Jekyll and Hyde. Clark doesn't just take off his glasses—his entire posture and attitude changes too. It's going to look *great*."

BY CLIFF BIGGERS WITH MATT BRADY

The Games People Play

BY BRETT BROOKS

Six New Opponents for VS

The success of the *VS CCG* from Upper Deck has been well noted from any number of sources, but their plans for 2005 are ambitious, to say the least. Upper Deck plans to release a total of eight products for the *VS CCG* system next year, with four each for *Marvel VS.* and *DC VS.* each. First up is the *Marvel Knights* expansion for *Marvel VS.* coming this February, followed by the *Green Lantern Corps* expansion for *DC VS.* in May.

Two films form the backdrop for summer releases. *Batman Begins* inspires the new *Batman Starter Deck* in March, with cards themed around the film scheduled to hit theaters on June 18th, including extended art foil cards, variant artwork cards, and some unique cards. Then in June, Upper Deck will release the new *Fantastic Four Starter Deck*, themed around the upcoming film for early July, with similar special material as the *Batman Starter*.

Two more standard expansions are planned for the last half of the year, with *The Avengers* booster packs shipping in August, and *The Justice League of America* booster packs releasing in November.

The other new products for the year are two sets of collector tins, one for Marvel and one for DC, both scheduled to ship in October. The tins will each contain four yet-to-be-determined booster packs, along with a variant foil card that will correspond with the image on the outside of the tin.

Obviously, fans of the *VS.* game system have a lot to look forward to this coming year. With new product scheduled to ship regularly throughout the year, there is always going to be something new to keep your interest peaked.

Decipher Not Hiding Wars Promos

Decipher has had a lot of luck with their promotional cards for new games in the past couple of years, so they see no reason to stop now. The first expansion for their recent *Wars CCG* will be titled *Nowhere To Hide*, and select retailers will receive an exclusive foil promotional card, Inca Fighter, that ships with the starters and boosters in early / mid January..

Marvel Gets Board

Next summer, fans of Marvel Comics will have a new way to play. Nexus Games, the company responsible for the *War of the Ring* strategy game, has acquired a license to produce a Marvel Comics strategy board game. Tentative plans are for a game that will take players through Manhattan, Atlantis, and the Negative Zone as one to six players compete to win. Details are not available at this time, but you can rest assured that *CSN* will keep you informed with all the latest.

Throne Sits On Limited Edition

Guardians of Order announced the upcoming *Game of Thrones RPG* a while back, and now more information has come to light about this highly anticipated game. Next summer will see the release of the standard game, but those folks that can't wait will have their chance to get their hands on it a couple of months early. *The Deluxe Limited Edition Game of Thrones Role-Playing Game and Resource Book* will ship in March for the suggested retail price of $99.99.

So what do you get for that extra money? Well, for one, you will get both the Tri-Stat and d20 rules under one cover; Guardians of Order will release the Tri-Stat and d20 rules as sperate books in the summer. *The Deluxe Edition* also will have a foil-embossed leatherette cover with a dustjacket with art by Mike S. Miller. To top it all off, the book is expected to come with a *Gamemaster's Screen* and an introductory adventure with the core book.

Guardians will limit the production of this volume to exact orders, estimating a print run of about one thousand copies—so if you want this special edition, you might want to talk to your local store about pre-ordering it now (and tell 'em that *CSN* sent ya!).

White Wolf Lets Out Secret

White Wolf is best known for their World of Darkness line that includes *Vampire: The Requiem* and the upcoming *Werewolf: The Forsaken*. But they have also made a name for themselves publishing a line of d20 products under the Sword and Sorcery imprint. But next year White Wolf will enter the realm of publishing non-d20 product created by outside companies. *The Secret of Zir'an* is the creation of Paragon Games, and will use their own creation, The Finesse System. The setting is said to be a world of technology and magic married together in a world where they have co-existed. No other details are available on the game at this time.

WOTC Springs New Lineup

The Summer heat is upon us. Oh sure, it might be a little cold outside at the moment, but if you 're a fan of *Dungeons and Dragons* and the rest of the fantasy gaming line from Wizards of the Coast, you can start looking forward to summer.

First, the core *Dungeons and Dragons* game setting has four big products scheduled. Highlighting the group is the new *Dungeon Masters Guide II* ($29.95), scheduled to arrive in June. This new 288-page hardcover will be an indispensible sourcebook, including information on running campaigns, building prestige classes, and has ready-to-use materials such as traps, locations, treasures, and a fully-realized town.

Not to be outdone, *Weapons of Legacy* ($34.95), scheduled for July, is a full book of magic items, complete with histories to be used in any game. *Battlefield Adventures* ($34.95) due out in May is a sourcebook designed to teach players how to incorporate mass-combat into your game. And the latest in the Environment Series, *Maelstrom* ($34.95) which covers the rules for running a game in a watery environment, due out in August.

If you're a fan of one of WOTCs many campaign settings, then you will have a great summer, too. *Forgotten Realms* fans in particular have something great to look forward to with the announcement of the upcoming *City of Splendor: Waterdeep* ($29.95). One of the most beloved cities in *D&D* history is back this July, not only exploring the city itself, but providing new equipment, magic items, psionic powers, poisons, spells, and much more. Also for *Forgotten Realms* is the new *Champions of Ruin* ($29.95) hardcover, due out in May and providing a guide to playing an evil character in the Realms.

Eberron is getting several new products this Summer, including *The Explorer's Handbook* ($29.95) in August. This hardcover is designed to get players to explore the entire world of *Eberron*, providing means and reasons for travel. *Five Nations* ($29.95) coming out in June gives you the information on the different regions of the *Eberron* world so that you can explore. Round that out with the *Deluxe Eberron Dungeon Master's Screen* ($14.95) in July and the *Deluxe Eberron Player Character Sheets* ($14.95) in August, and you've got a full roster of product for the *Eberron* fan this Summer.

You can also look for the *d20 Apocalypse* ($19.95) paperback for the *d20 Modern* game system in June. This book provides all the rules that a player needs to run a post-apocalyptic campaign, whether it is caused by human, aliens, or holy retribution.

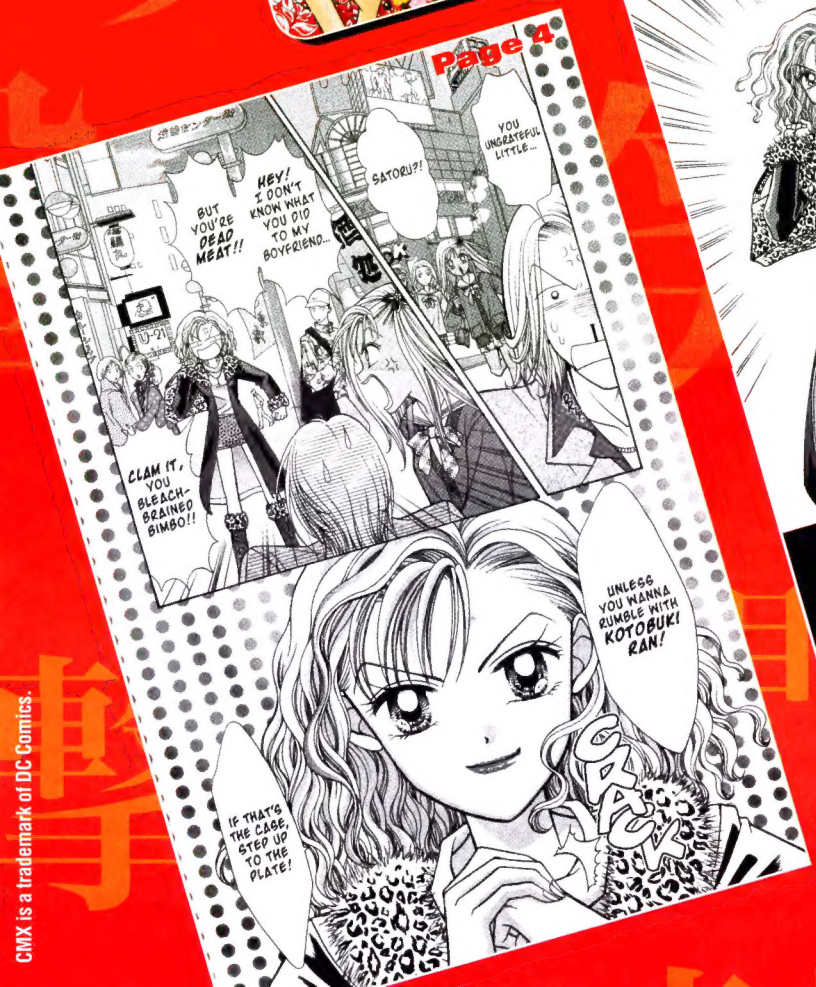
Fans of WOTC's miniature games can also look for new products for both the *Star Wars* and *Dungeons and Dragons* line. Just in time for the new movie, *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* starters ($24.95) and boosters ($12.99) will feature characters and creatures from the *Episode III* before the release of the film. Also in May, *Ultimate Missions: Revenge of the Sith* ($29.99) is a paperback volume that contains information and scenarios unique to the setting of the film, including maps and terrain. And if you are ready to get large, look for the *Star Wars Universe Huge Packs* ($19.99) in August, which will include seven standard figures and one huge figure taken from all eras of the Star Wars timeline. *The Dungeons and Dragons: Angelfire* booster ($12.99) brings the ultimate battle of good vs. evil to the world, bringing more creations from various game settings to miniature life in June.

cmx PURE MANGA

*GALS

Art and story by Fujii

Here's an exciting 4-page pr


Page 4
BUT YOU'RE DEAD MEAT!!
HEY! I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DID TO MY BOYFRIEND...
SATORU?!
YOU UNGRATEFUL LITTLE...
CLAM IT, YOU BLEACH-BRAINED BIMBO!!
UNLESS YOU WANNA RUMBLE WITH KOTOBUKI RAN!
CRACK
IF THAT'S THE CAGE, STEP UP TO THE PLATE!

Page 3
SKID
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'CAUSE I CAN'T THINK OF ANY GIRL WHO'D GET HOT AND BOTHERED OVER A CREEP LIKE YOU!
TREAT ME LIKE SOME PENNY YOU CAN JUST PICK UP OFF THE STREET...
MORON!

Self-styled kogal queen
includes shoppin
Unfortunately
by dirty
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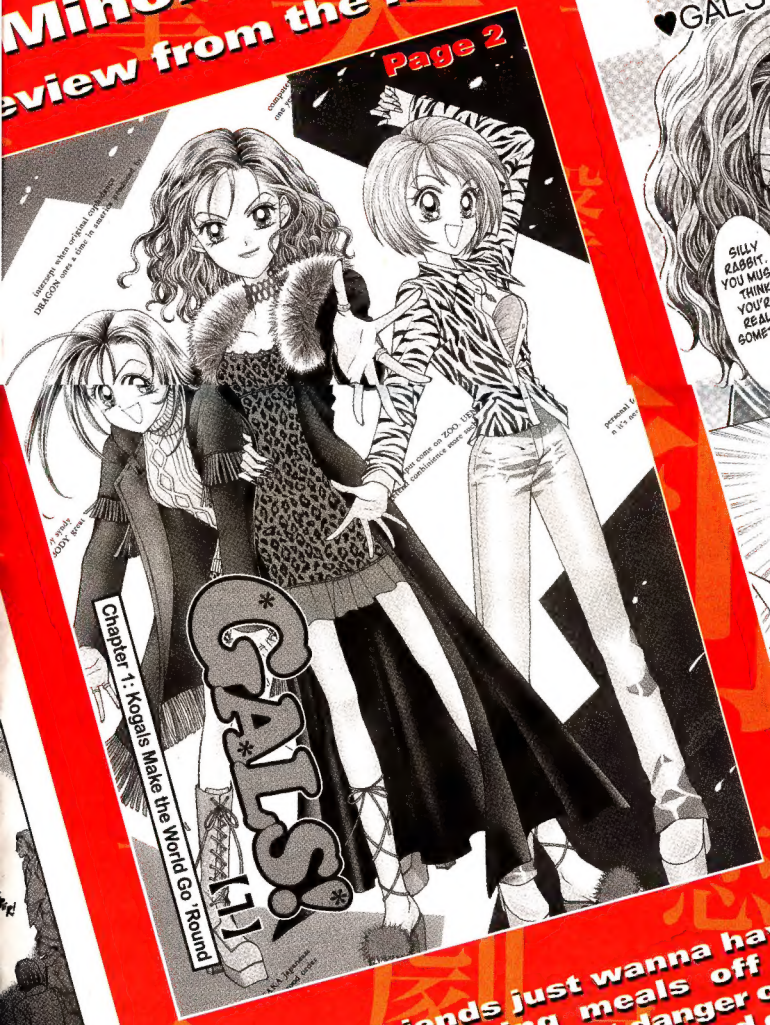
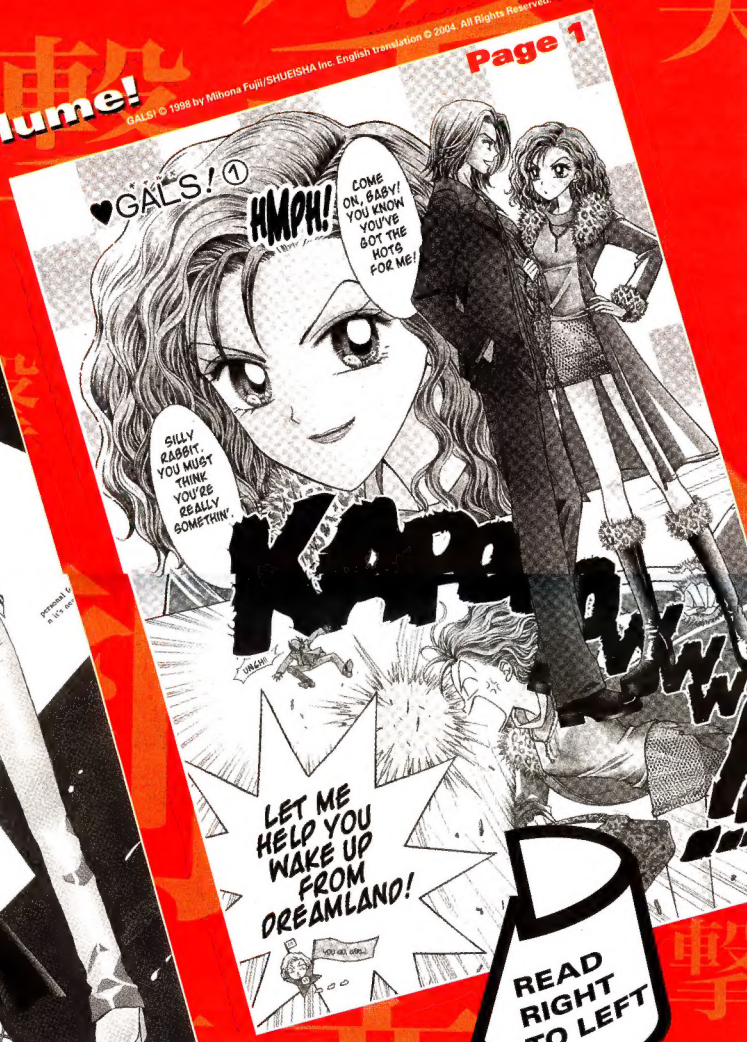
Mihona

eview from the first volume!

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Page 1
GALS! ①
HMPH!
COME ON, BABY! YOU KNOW YOU'VE GOT THE HOTS FOR ME!
SILLY RABBIT. YOU MUST THINK YOU'RE REALLY SOMETHIN'.
KAPA
LET ME HELP YOU WAKE UP FROM DREAMLAND!
READ RIGHT TO LEFT

otobuki Ran and her friends just wanna have fun, which hanging out, and scamming meals off gullible guys. their 'hood — Shibuya — is in constant danger of being despoiled old men, street gangs, nasty kogal rivals, and other societal evils. t with a little help from her friends and a toughness learned from a family full of cops, Ran takes on the bad guys (and gals) with gusto!

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15th Annual Red K Awards

Can it be true? Have we really put another comics year to rest? You bet—and that means that it's time for our once-a-year tribute to the best and worst that the past twelve months have delivered! That's right, here come the *CSN Red K Awards*, our way of rewarding the best, as well as the most dubious, accomplishments of the past year. (And just like with the fabled Red K of the *Mort Weisinger* Superman era, our Red K can be unpredictable!)

The Mark of Zor-El

Superman/Batman #s 8-13 *by Jeph Loeb & Michael Turner*

Supergirl was never an A-team superheroine during her pre-Crisis tenure—but she's definitely soaring in the superhero stratosphere now, thanks to a top-notch revamp by *Jeph Loeb & Michael Turner*. Issue after issue, the series held a spot at or near the top of the sales charts—so when do we get that Supergirl solo series that everyone's dying to read?

The "Time Fades Away" Award

The 80's Retro Fad

A couple of years ago, titles like ***G.I. Joe, Transformers, Thundercats,*** and ***Masters of the Universe*** were taking top-ranked slots on the sales charts, and fans were dying for more. Now fans are looking for something different, and it's the *books* that are dying in some cases. Sort of like what happened to these same titles as the eighties came to an end...

The "Playing Politics" Award

Avengers Disassembled

The "we're to blame for what happened to us" speech transformed the overly brutal end of the Avengers into a heavy-handed and ill-conceived political metaphor that left a bad aftertaste. As for the whole "Scarlet Witch gone bad" scenario... well, we liked it much more when it played out in Avengers West Coast over a decade ago!....

The "Less Is More" Award

Less Than Heroes

Ever since we first discovered the wonder of *David Yurkovich's* imagination through his brilliant ***Death by Chocolate***, we've sung the praises of this creator's blending of surreal storylines and McKeeveresque visuals. So it was a real treat to see Yurkovich revisit one of his early works, ***Threshold***, expanding and reworking it into this captivating superhuman-interest saga. Now let's hope that the rest of Yurkovich's *oeuvre* comes back into print in similar fashion!

The "Not-So-Secret Identity" Award

Identity Crisis

The identity of the killer may have been a well-kept secret, but the appeal of ***Identity Crisis***' compelling superhero whodunnit was no secret at all! Brad Meltzer & Rags Morales mixed Silver Age superheroics, interpersonal drama, a dash of Doc Savage, and classic mystery—and the result was the undisputed comic book event of the year!

The "X Marks the Spot" Award

Astonishing X-Men

For years, the X-Men's interwoven continuity was both an asset and a liability to the franchise. Veteran readers enjoyed its complexity, but newcomers found that some continuity to be almost impenetrable. Then *Joss Whedon & John Cassaday* came along with the most reader-friendly X-book in decades—a series that captures the excitement of the mutant superteam at its best while streamlining the continuity to a reader-friendly, newcomer-accessible storyline that actually made sense. In one six-issue story arc, Whedon restored a sense of wonder that's been largely lost under a confusing morass of cross-references, plot-threads, and mutant allusions.

The "Barbarian Conquest" Award

Conan

Once again, *Robert E. Howard's* sword-wielding anti-hero conquers the comics racks, thanks to *Kurt Busiek's* dead-on channeling of . Howard's story sensibilities and *Cary Nord & Thomas Yeates'* lush art, with its echoes of Wyeth and Frazetta. Of course, it seems only right that Conan should be a cutting-edge comics hit—after all, a lot of today's outcast antiheroes owe an immeasurable debt to the Cimmerian!

The "Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde" Award

Bob Haney, Irv Novick, Harry Lampert, Irwin Donenfeld

Alas, too many of the industry's pioneers are leaving us; it seems like every month brings news of another loss. For fans of the Silver Age, the deaths of Haney & Novick are particularly sad, since these two top talents gave us so many memorable Silver Age tales.

The "Mighty Fine" Award

Howard Chaykin's Mighty Love

Chaykin proved that he still has what it takes with this clever, fast-paced, tempestuous romance-adventure that cast a cop and an attorney as reluctant costume-clad partners in non-crime. So where's the next book—or better yet, the series?

The "Well, That's One Way to Guarantee a Sell-Out" Award

Rob Liefeld's Youngblood: Imperial #2

As if making readers wait almost two years between the first and second issues of the series weren't enough of a slap in the face, *Rob Liefeld* chose to hawk his wares at conventions before filling orders for comics shops; by the time he finally got around to shipping the books to the shops, he had so few left that shops got only a small fraction of the copies they had ordered for their reading audience.

And that means that over half of the folks who might have picked up the second issue won't have the opportunity...

The Star-Crossed Award

CrossGen

They did so many things right—great stories, first-class creators, top-of-the-line production values—but there was one thing that they couldn't do right: make a profit. The publisher never managed to overcome some bad business decisions, and by the spring of 2004 they had become comics' latest high-profile casualty, joining Pacific, First, Eclipse, Malibu, and Valiant in the "I could'a been a contender" charts. There is a light on the horizon, though: Disney's acquisition of CrossGen's assets could result in the return of some CrossGen titles in 2005 in one form or another...

The "Digest-ive Aid" Award

Comic book digests

2004 was the year for the comics digest—particularly for all-ages properties, where such titles as ***Teen Titans Go!, Justice League Adventures, Donald Duck Adventures, Marvel Age Spider-Man, Marvel Age Fantastic Four, Spider-Girl,*** and ***Runaways*** have found new life in these compact, durable, affordable, kid-friendly editions. Now howsabout some bargain collections of classic material in the same format?

The "Snatching Defeat From the Jaws of Victory" Award

Aliens Versus Predator: Thrill of the Hunt

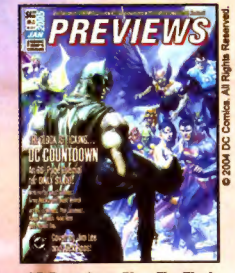
More than a decade after Dark Horse presented the famous first ***Aliens Vs. Predator*** meeting in the pages of a best-selling comic book limited series, their idea became a cinematic reality. Somehow, though, Dark Horse screwed up their opportunity to produce a comics tie-in for the film inspired by their own comics concept: their new ***Aliens Vs. Predator: Thrill of the Hunt*** one-shot *totally* missed the film tie-in window of opportunity, reaching comic shops long after ***AvP*** had become the flavor of the previous month...

PREVIEWS

One Catalog, TONS of Cool Stuff.

The January 2005 Previews has 500+ pages of cool stuff that starts shipping in March!

ON THE COVERS ...



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DC Countdown #1 — *The Clock is ticking...* get in on this star-filled 80-page debut for only $1.00!

Mark Waid and Marc Silvestri unleash Hunter/Killer #1 from Image Comics and Top Cow Studios!

500+ pages of cool stuff that starts shipping in March!

CHECK OUT THESE OFFERINGS:

Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith TP! Dark Horse presents the official comics adaptation of the most anticipated of the *Star Wars* films!

Batman: Cover To Cover! A 240-page oversized hardcover spotlighting over 250 of the best *Batman* covers of all time!

Wanted HC! One of the most talked-about superhero series of the year is now collected in this stunning hardcover edition from Image Comics and Top Cow!

Ultimate Iron-Man #1! Marvel Comics presents the solo debut of the Ultimate Iron Man, written by best-selling author, Orson Scott Card, with art by Andy Kubert!

AND BE SURE NOT TO MISS:

- **Cromartie High School Volume 1** Manga from ADV Films!
- **The X-Files Volume 1 TP** from Checker Book Publishing!
- **Dawn 15th Anniversary Cards** from Dynamic Forces!
- **The R. Crumb Handbook w/CD** in the Books Section!
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The LuluPalooza Award

Dark Horse's *Little Lulu* Reprint Volumes

There are some series that are so important that the field benefits from having them in print—and Irving Tripp & John Stanley's Little Lulu is one such work. Now, if we could only see someone announce affordable volumes of the EC library, *Sugar & Spike*, and *Tarzan*...

The "Drawing on Their Popularity" Award

Sketch covers

The black and white sketch became the cover du jour in 2004, with DC and Marvel finding success with sketch cover editions of such comics as ***Superman #204***, ***Identity Crisis #s 1 & 2***, ***Green Lantern: Rebirth #s 1 & 2***, **and** ***Secret War Books One & Two***. Marvel took it to the extreme with the all-sketch variant edition of ***Ultimates 2 #1***, which offered the pencil art to the entire first issue, sans lettering, inks, and color. Don't be surprised if at least one enterprising publisher offers a sketch cover on their first editions in 2005, following it up with a variant inked-and-colored edition!

The "Gravity Test" Award

Liberty Meadows and ***PVP***

The whole idea of binding a comic on its short edge rather than its long edge doesn't seem problematic in theory—but put a stack of top-edge-bound comics on any comic shop rack, and you'll soon see the havoc that gravity wreaks on the books: they begin to look more bowlegged than a character in a ***Lucky Luke*** comic. It turns out that there's a good reason for doing things the old-fashioned way...

The "I Think I'm Turning Japanese" Award

Fake Manga

With all the *real* manga on the comic shop racks, you have to wonder why some publishers feel the need to enlist imitative artists and derivative writers to produce fake manga—and unfortunately, most of these manga-wannabees have about as much appeal as Spam sushi...

The "Fission for Compliments" Award

Action Heroes Archives Volume One Featuring Steve Ditko's Captain Atom

Everyone is familiar with *Steve Ditko's* stunning work on the early issues of ***Amazing Spider-Man***, but even the most diehard Silver Age fan never imagined that Ditko's equally powerful work on Charlton's space-faring Captain Atom (whose earliest exploits predate the first appearance of Spidey by several years) would eventually be collected in a handsome hardcover edition. These short, sharp adventure tales represent Charlton at its best—and now we can enjoy them anew in an affordable ***Archives*** edition!

To Bolling Go Where No Fan Has Gone Before Award

Adventures of Little Archie TP

At long last, the Carl Barks of Archie Comics gets his due! Blending humor, adventure, and human interest, this trade paperback compilation of *Bob Bolling's* ***Little Archie*** shows how Bolling brought a much-needed depth and complexity to the Archie mythos, transforming teen stereotypes into people with the sort of childhood experiences we all dreamed of...

The "Oh Say Can You See?" Award

American Flagg! HC & TP

A great collection of Chaykin's most acclaimed work, the ***American Flagg!*** collection even got some very positive mainstream press. What we *didn't* get, however, was the book; 2004 came and went without a ***Flagg!***-raising—and that's a real shame, considering what a great holiday gift the hardcover collection could have been...

The "I Did It My Way" Award

Dave Sim's ***Cerebus***

2004 saw the end of *Dave Sim's* long-running aardvark saga ***Cerebus***. Was the ending all that we had hoped it would be? No... but then again, how could it be? Over the years, ***Cerebus*** had metamorphosed from a Conan spoof to a social satire to a personal drama to an absurdist fantasy to an ill-fated romance to a treatise on the human condition. Just as in life, sometimes literature doesn't end the way would hope... but the fact that one man saw his independent vision through a three-hundred-issue odyssey is an unparallelled accomplishment.

The "Statute of Limitations" Award

Wanted #6

In late 2003, we told you all about the December MillarWorld launch of several titles, including the six-issue monthly series ***Wanted***. Now, a year later, we're all still waiting for Millar & Jones to finish up the storyline, with no word on when that series might finally wrap up. Of course, we also haven't seen the next issue of ***Unfunnies***... but no one's really waiting on that one, since it lives up to its name quite nicely...

The "Worth the Wait" Award

The Last Heroes

The final issue of this four-part superhero saga produced by *Steven Grant* and the legendary *Gil Kane* never saw print back in the final days of Malibu's Bravura imprint—but now, thanks to Byron Preiss and the folks at iBooks, this ground-level look at superheroes is finally complete. Take a look at the stunning Kane art and you'll understand why we're so glad that this missing issue saw print—even if it *is* over ten years late...

The "King-Sized Blankets" Award

Blankets

Craig Thompson's powerful human-interest work is a true graphic novel, a complex tale hundreds of pages in length. And it's not a collected edition of a previously-published limited series—it's an *original work*, and that makes it even more impressive. How many creators are willing to put in that sort of commitment, preparing a project of this magnitude with no income until the whole thing was finished? Now *that's* dedication!...

The "Stop-and-Go Driver" Award

BMW Films' The Hire

The first issue of this series was released to great fanfare back in the summer... and then the engine sputtered and the whole project ran out of gas, apparently. We're still waiting for this series to hit second gear; at this rate, they may have to rework the art so that the enigmatic driver isn't sitting behind the wheel of an antique car!

The "Some Day Our Prints Will Come" Award

Second Printings

Thanks to those publishers who helped to meet reader demand with second printings of sellout titles. Now if only every publisher would realize how much easier it is to introduce readers to a series when the comics are actually available while the series is still hot!

The "Hal and Hearty" Award

Green Lantern: Rebirth

It stars Hal Jordan. He's coming back as Green Lantern. That says it all...

And Now...

It's your turn! Each year, we encourage our *CSN* readers to present their own Red K Awards; what glorious highs, ignominious lows, or noteworthy occurrences did we fail to honor? Remedy our oversight with an award of your own! Remember, cleverness counts—and we encourage you to mind your manners! So what are you waiting for? Starting bombarding us with *your* Red K Awards (and see if you can top four-time champ *Steve Chung*, who's contributed several hundred Red K's of his own in years past), and maybe you'll see your name in print! You can e-mail your nominations to **redk@comicshopnews.com** or you can snail-mail 'em to:

CSN Red K Awards
2770 Carillon Crossing
Marietta GA 30066

Not only will our faves see print in *CSN* in March, but we'll choose from among the published entries and award a few special prizes to the lucky winners. So what are you waiting for?

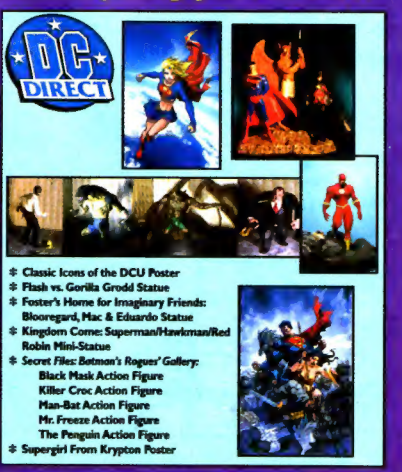
Only the Best...Only in *PREVIEWS*

You want the best? We've got it! This month's *Previews* is chock-full of incredible toys, models, and more, with a selection of genres from the hottest comics to the coolest movies and beyond! Quality, diversity, variety...only in *Previews*!

Check out the January *PREVIEWS*, on sale December 22nd, for everything you see here!

* Alien vs. Predator Bookends
* Marvel Select: Symbiote Spider-Man Action Figure
* Marvel Universe: Hulk Bust
* Marvel: Iron Man Maquette
* Premiere Collection: Symbiote Spider-Man Statue

* Buffy Official Magazine #18 PX Cover Ed.
* Dynamic Forces Dawn 15th Anniversary T/C with PX Box Topper
* Deleter Beginner Tone Sets L, M, & N
* How to Draw Manga: Animals
* How to Draw Manga: Computones Vol. 1
* How to Draw Manga: Super Deformed Characters Vol. 2—Animals
* How to Draw Manga: Ultimate Manga Lessons #1
* I'm Ninja (You Can't See Me) T-Shirt
* Inu-Yasha Raglan Coming At You Workshirt
* Kanji de Manga
* New Generation of Manga Artists #7: Special Edition—Nouvels Logic
* Smallville Official Magazine #7 PX Cover Ed.
* Smallville Official Magazine #8 PX Cover Ed.
* Tarot: Witch of the Black Rose #31 PX Signed Photo Cvr. Ed.
* Vampire Savior Mini-Figures Asst. #1 & #2



* Classic Icons of the DCU Poster
* Flash vs. Gorilla Grodd Statue
* Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends: Blooregard, Mac & Eduardo Statue
* Kingdom Come: Superman/Hawkman/Red Robin Mini-Statue
* Secret Files: Batman's Rogues' Gallery: Black Mask Action Figure, Killer Croc Action Figure, Man-Bat Action Figure, Mr. Freeze Action Figure, The Penguin Action Figure
* Supergirl From Krypton Poster

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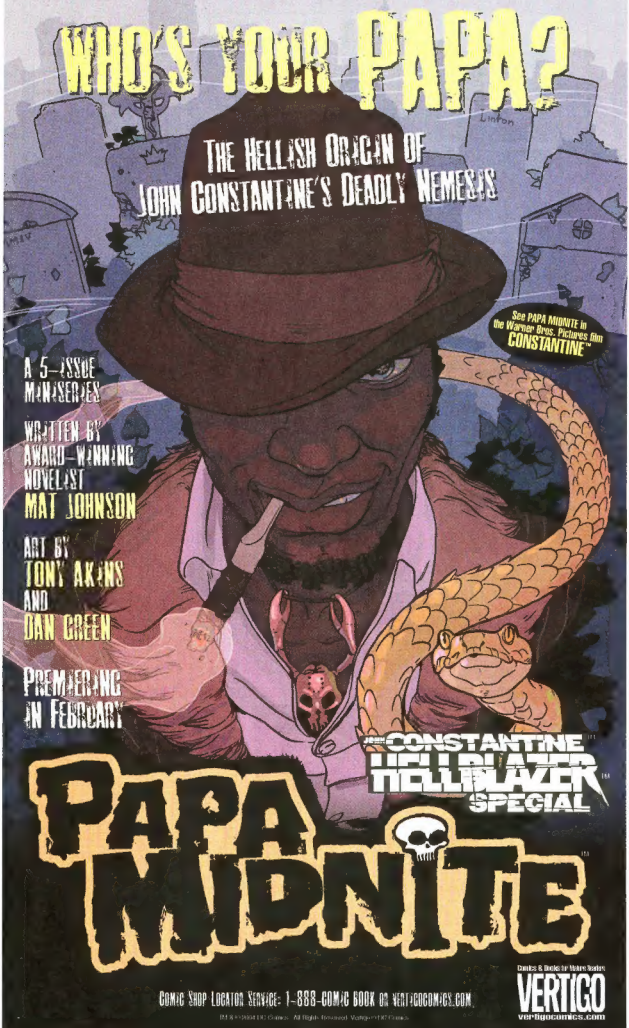
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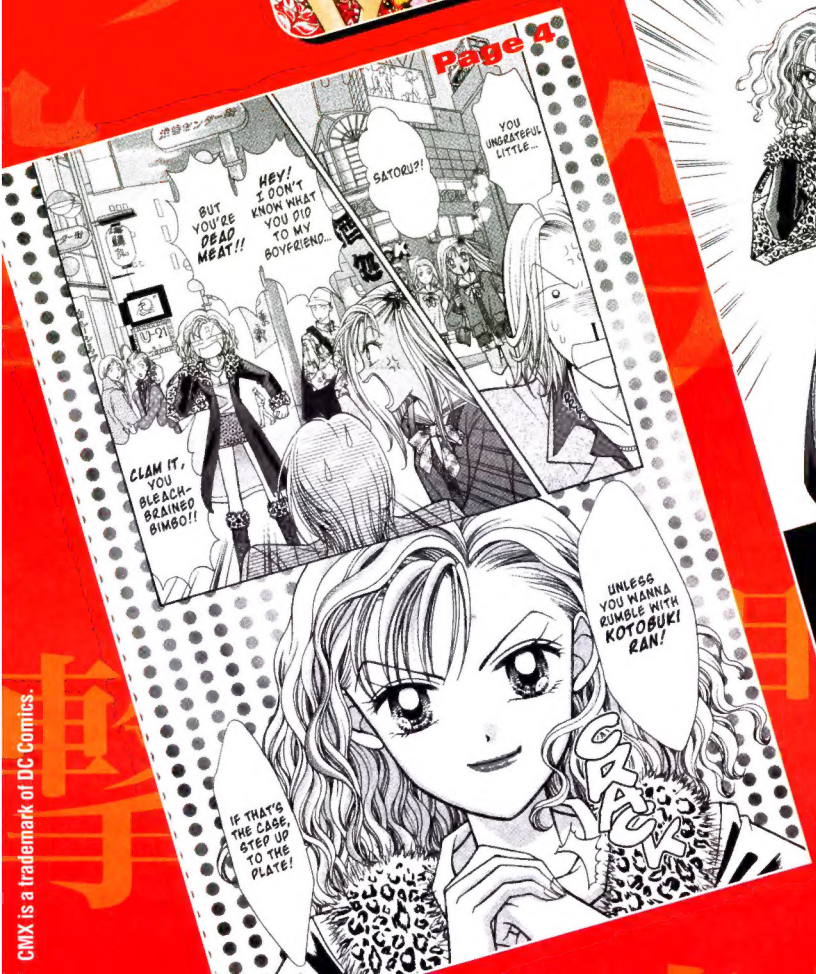
cmx PURE MANGA

*GAL*S

Art and story by Fujii

Here's an exciting 4-page pr


Page 4
渋谷センター街
BUT YOU'RE DEAD MEAT!!
HEY! I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DID TO MY BOYFRIEND...
SATORU?!
YOU UNGRATEFUL LITTLE...
CLAM IT, YOU BLEACH-BRAINED BIMBO!!
UNLESS YOU WANNA RUMBLE WITH KOTOBUKI RAN!
CRACK
IF THAT'S THE CAGE, STEP UP TO THE PLATE!

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includes shopping
Unfortunately
by dirty
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eview from the first volume!

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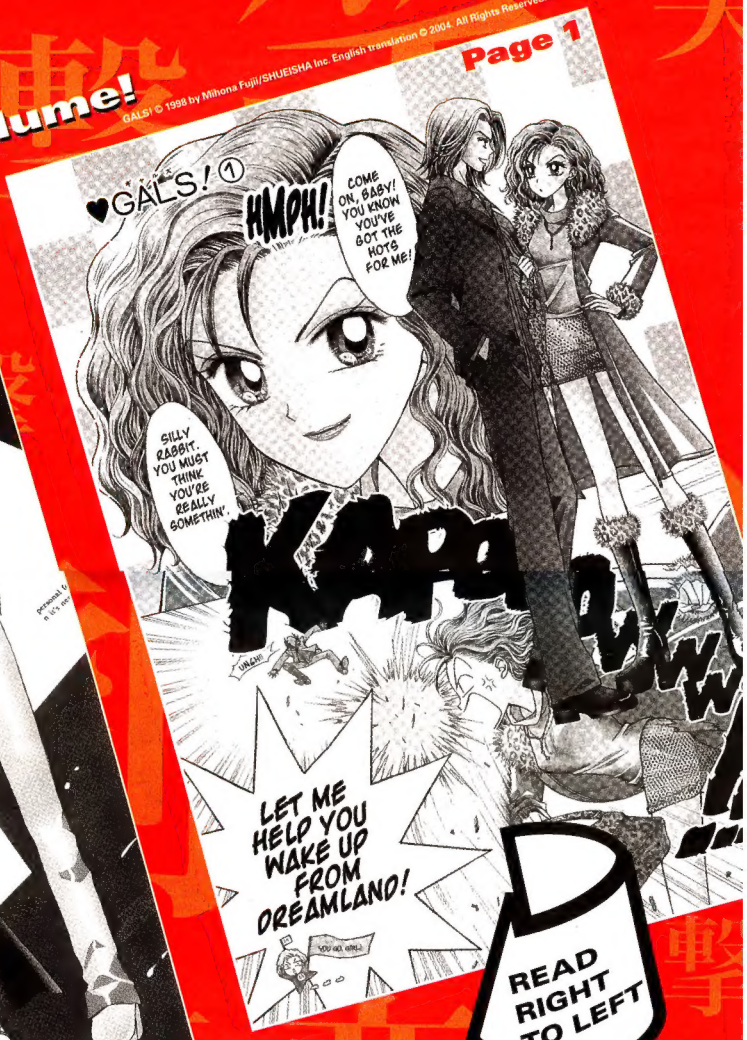
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